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R&D Chronicles: The Story of Dr. Rivers and the Origin of NAMRU-2 Part I

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Dr. Thomas Rivers (front and center) with members of the Rockefeller Hospital Naval Research Unit, 1943. Standing directly two rows behind him (fifth from the left) is a young Dr. Robert Phillips, later a prominent Navy medical officer, cholera pioneer and future Commanding Officer of NAMRU-2. Courtesy of The Rockefeller University Archives.

"I was asked to take a trip to the South Pacific to see whether it would be useful to organize a medical research unit at the fighting front."

**~Rear Adm. Thomas Milton Rivers, Medical Corps, USNR on the formation of NAMRU-2
(From an oral history with Saul Beniston, published posthumously in 1967)**

The Rockefeller Institute, now Rockefeller University, in Manhattan, New York, has been the nation's preeminent biomedical research center since its inception in 1901. Over the course of its storied history, the Rockefeller Institute has been home to some of the most significant figures in medical science. Among them was the Jonesboro, Georgia-born Dr. Thomas Milton Rivers (1888-1962).

Rivers first came to the Rockefeller Institute in 1922 following several years at Johns Hopkins and a short stint in the Army Medical Corps. Over the next decade he would help establish virology as a unique discipline through his work on filterable viruses and studying the

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pathological effects of viral infections. His ground-breaking research on polio and oversight of the clinical trials for Dr. Jonas Salk’s life-saving vaccine would only further solidify his scientific legacy.

His contributions to science go far beyond being a famous virologist and medical researcher. What is far less well-known about his career is the foundational role he played in the establishment of the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU) No. 2—a name that has long been synonymous with the fight against infectious and communicable diseases in Asia.

Rivers joined the naval reserves in July 1940 while serving as director of the Rockefeller Institute Hospital. Soon after, he would begin persuading a number of his illustrious colleagues to do the same.

Under the guidance of the now “Commander” Rivers, this collective of medical reservists became, what was termed, the “Rockefeller Hospital Naval Research Unit.” Throughout World War II working in conjunction with the Naval Hospital Brooklyn, this unit would take on some of the Navy’s most severe cases of acute hepatitis, rheumatic fever and atypical pneumonia while also conducting cutting-edge research on the diseases of importance to the military.

In July 1943, Rivers relinquished the reins of the unit to serve on a naval commission in Washington, D.C. looking into the problems of scrub typhus and infectious hepatitis then plaguing the Armed Forces in the South Pacific. His first meeting would prove more than a little fortuitous for Rivers and the future of medical research. As he remembered in a 1961 oral history, “During the discussion, a great deal of doubt was expressed as to the utility of work performed by temporary commissions, and someone suggested that it might be a better idea if a permanent research unit were established close to the fighting lines to investigate medical problems as they came up.”

Vice Adm. Ross McIntire, the Surgeon General of the Navy, and Rear Adm. Howard W. Smith, then Director of the Research Division at the Bureau of Medicine (BUMED), not only supported the idea of a frontline research unit, but tasked Rivers to investigate its feasibility and survey potential sites.

At the age of 55—having never voyaged west of California—Rivers embarked on a tour of military bases throughout the Pacific from the New Hebrides to the Solomons to the Russell Islands. He interviewed medical officers at mobile hospitals and embedded with Marine units to collect their first-hand experiences with the endemic diseases. Along this journey, Rivers also met with Admirals Chester Nimitz and William “Bull” Halsey to outline the value of a research unit. Their support for the project would be unanimous.

Rivers returned to Washington in December 1943 to brief the Surgeon General on prospective sites for the lab. In January 1944, NAMRU-2 was authorized by the Secretary of the Navy with the initial plan to establish it on Guadalcanal. The next month, Rivers was formally placed in charge of the unit and tasked with recruiting personnel and acquiring equipment.

This ambitious enterprise would take time to stand up. In fact, it would take over nine months to place NAMRU-2 into operation, and about a year before it was fully staffed. In that time, naval leadership decided to relocate the laboratory from Guadalcanal to the newly liberated territory of Guam.

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